

Ashes

Ashes

CHRISTOPHER
DE VINCK

INSPIRE

“Who would ever think that so much
went on in the soul of a young girl?”
—Anne Frank

AUTHOR'S NOTE

All unattributed epigraphs are either excerpts or memories as recorded and shared in the war journal of Major General Joseph Henri Kestens, the author's grandfather. Major General Kestens was awarded the Croix de Guerre for bravery, and served in the Belgian Army during the Second World War as part of the Belgian Resistance, before being captured and imprisoned in Spain. Following his liberation, he spent the rest of the war in London. After the War, he returned to Brussels. His family, including the author's mother, emigrated to New Jersey, USA, via London, in 1948.

Dedication
To *Catherine de Vinck*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher de Vinck is the author of twelve books and numerous articles and essays. His writing has been featured in *The New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*. He delivers speeches on faith, disability, fatherhood, and writing, and he has been invited to speak at the Vatican. He is the father of three and lives in New Jersey with his wife.

PROLOGUE

Terror. Pandemonium. Panic. Children wailed. People shouted, 'Get down! Get down!'

Brussels: a city consumed by fear. People rushed out of their homes, spilling onto the narrow streets, crashing into each other with suitcases and rumours about tanks crushing women, Nazis with bayonets, Antwerp to the north in flames. My father had said the invasion would happen. Where was my father now?

Like so many frightened people, I ran too. A man carrying a typewriter pushed me aside. I fell against a woman who asked if I had seen her daughter.

'Julie, she was just here, holding my hand. She was sucked up into the crowd. Do you know where my daughter is?'

I was swallowed into the mosaic of red shirts, blue trousers, cotton skirts. Clothes seeming to move in terror, not filled with people, but with ghosts floating inside the sleeves and coats. Ghosts with grey features, slackened jaws and hollow eyes.

I looked up and did not see clouds and spring leaves, but something much darker that seemed to shroud the entire city. Outstretched wings soared high above my head, and what looked like the belly of a dragon.

I broke away from the mob, pushing my way between men in

clogs and woman carrying crying children and baskets of bread, forcing my way towards Hava's house. I needed to get to Hava. Then I heard a low sound, a growl. The belly of the dragon dropped closer until it finally became a plane swooping down towards the street. Closer. Closer. Then, a burst of blinding light flashed from under the wings, spraying bullets all around me.

People called out and cried again and again, 'Get down! Get down!'

Bullets shredded the back of a man who managed to throw himself over a small boy who shrieked, 'Daddy!' A woman's jaw was severed from her mouth. Blood splashed onto my blouse. I fell to the ground, holding my arms. I wanted my father. I wanted Hava. I didn't know what to do.

Seconds later, the bullets stopped. The plane disappeared. All was silent for a moment, a brief moment, as if the world took a deep breath. And then there was a scream. It was almost as if the wheels of a train had locked and strained against the railway tracks, a high-pitched sound like the wail of metal against metal. Tragedy embodied that scream: horror, conveyed in a single, anguished cry.

A woman held a small girl in her arms. She wailed, 'Julie! Julie!' The little girl's arms dangled at her sides like winter vines. Her head lolled back, her legs were limp. The side of the girl's face and the cobblestones beneath my feet were streaked with blood. She was dead.

'Julie! Julie!' The woman moaned and rocked the child in her arms. She looked at me, as if to ask if I might save her daughter. 'Julie?' she pleaded. I looked at the small curls on the girl's shattered skull, turned, stumbled and skinned my knees. Blood dripped down my legs.

'Julie! Julie!'

I stood up. I ran. More people shouted. I ran on. The silence had been replaced with howls of grief and pain. Trams ground their way through the thick crowd. More planes flew overhead.

‘Julie! Julie!’

The sound of the girl’s name rose above the calls and cries of other people. I felt that the little girl was chasing me, blood rushing down her face.

I pushed my way forward, squeezing between shoulders, arms, legs, and bundles of clothing.

When I reached the other side of the square, I stopped and leaned against a building and looked back. Like ants whose nest had been disturbed, people stumbled over each other, desperate to save what they could. They carried photo albums, bags of sugar, money, anything to help them out of the city, out of the path of the monster; to help them carry out with them what they knew and who they were.

The Nazis were coming. Belgium was under siege.

Run! I thought. Run! Run! They must not get me. They must not shoot off my arms!

I knew Hava would be in her house. I knew that is where she would be.

I ran down a familiar side street. I could see the windows of Hava’s home. They were dark.

CHAPTER 1

This is a war to end all wars.

Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, 1917

My father was a general, a major general, in the Belgian army. He didn't start that way. He had been a private during the First World War, an ordinary engineering student, who volunteered to fight for his country.

Everyone in Belgium knew about my father after the war. An ordinary student who became a private and who, it seemed, fought off the German invasion into central Belgium single-handedly.

In 1915, during the Second Battle of Ypres, the German army advanced towards France, but was stopped by Belgian troops at the Yser River, helped by intentional flooding, which temporarily stopped the battle. When the brutal fighting began again, under heavy fire from across the river, my father ran to an army supply truck, grabbed a shovel and began digging a trench. His commanding officer yelled at him to get down, but my father refused. 'The flood waters will soon go down! We can build a trench and keep the Germans on the other side of the river! We

can save Belgium! *Vive la Belgique!* And he kept digging.

Inspired by my father's courage, his commander ordered hundreds of soldiers to start digging too. Moments later, my father was shot by a sniper across the river and fell face-down into the trench. A bullet ripped through his left arm above his elbow, shattered the bone, tore out the other side and disappeared into the darkness. My father fell unconscious into the mud as blood drained quickly from the three-inch hole in his broken arm.

Thirteen hours later he woke up surrounded by white sheets, the smell of blood and urine, and the voice of a doctor saying to his nurse, 'Do you think I should cut it off from the elbow or from the shoulder?'

Assessing the size of the wound and the damage in the bone, the nurse replied, 'Just cut it all off.'

In the midst of the pain, and before the morphine, my father rolled his head slowly back and forth on the operating table and pleaded, 'Please, don't cut off my arm. Please ...' And then he lost consciousness again.

In modern times, if my father had suffered a gunshot wound, doctors with their microscopes and microsurgical techniques could have repaired his arm. In 1915, the best they could do was respect his wishes, stitch him up, and save the arm, which became just a prop, a dangling appendage, for the rest of his life. I spent much of my life as a child terrified that one day I too would lose an arm and look like him.

Sixteen hours later, in a field hospital in Belgium, my father stirred, licked his lips, and asked for water. As he listened to the water gurgling from the jug to a glass, he reached across with his right hand and patted his left shoulder. Then he slowly began to

run his hand downward, against the gauze and bandages, down to his elbow, down slowly inch by inch, until he touched the tips of his cold fingers on his left hand. His arm was still attached.

When my father asked the nurses about the battle, they told him that, because of him, a half-mile trench, in places only 45 metres from Germans bunkers, had been built. He later learned that this section of Belgium sustained some of the bloodiest fighting in the war: 76,000 German casualties; 20,000 Belgian deaths. But because of the 'Trench of Death', as it became known, that had begun with my father's shovel, that one small section of Belgium never fell to the Germans and inspired all of Belgium to hold on and resist the German invasion.

At the end of the First World War, my father was awarded the Croix de Guerre, the highest military medal for service to his country. The king himself pinned it onto his uniform, and the newspapers announced his heroics on their front pages: NATIONAL HERO: SAVED BELGIUM WITH A SHOVEL. His name was engraved on the reverse side of the medal: Joseph Lyon – my father.

CHAPTER 2

As Belgium struggled to recuperate after the devastation of the First World War, the country reminded all of Europe that Belgium was declared a neutral territory in 1831, and would continue to be a buffer between France and Germany.

I was 18 years old in 1939. My hair was brown. I had read *Gone with the Wind* in French, and my friend Hava Daniels found an advertisement for the film in an American magazine, and thought Clark Gable, the lead actor, looked like Otto the baker. I spent the autumn going to the opera with Hava.

We were Flemish, but of course everyone in Belgium had to speak both Flemish and French. At one time all the officers in the army spoke French, and all the soldiers spoke Flemish. Poor Belgium: half-Dutch, half-French.

I wasn't interested in politics. My father was afraid I spent too much time reading novels. He worried that my legs would be weak because I didn't walk enough. He thought I would go blind because I read so often beside the dim parlour light. He was also disturbed when I said 'Damn it!', imitating an American seamstress in a book I was reading.

My mother had died when I was born. I cooked, mended my father's uniforms, kept the washerwoman busy, and said the rosary three times every night, on my knees before a statue of Mary that I kept illuminated with penny candles.

My father was destined for a military career. He had wanted to be an artist, painting miniature scenes of Belgian farmland onto porcelain plates, but his father had felt that this was nonsense and had sent him to military school where he excelled in mathematics. After his fame in the First World War, he completed a Communication degree at the University of Ghent, was appointed the Military Commissioner of Communications for the entire Belgian army, and was given the rank of major general.

To me, he was just my father.

Our typical days began at the breakfast table where, each morning, he would ask me questions about life. 'What would you do in a panic?' he asked once as he buttered his toast. I could hear the scraping of the knife on the hard bread.

'Run?' I teased.

He did not laugh. A major general in the Belgian army did not run.

'Simone,' he said as he raised the butter knife in the air, 'you will need to know this someday. Think of life as a sailboat.' He lowered the knife and looked at me as I sat in my seat with a cup of tea in my hand, anxious to run off to school.

'Pretend you're on a small sailboat on a lake. You are guiding the ropes to control the shape and direction of the sails, when suddenly a strong wind blows down from the mountain and begins tipping the boat over sideways and rocking you violently. What do you do?'

I was tempted to say that I would jump in the water and swim

away, but that was the same as running in fear. So I said, knowing he expected more of me, 'Push the sailboat into the wind?'

'Just let go of the ropes, Simone. Just let go and let the sails flap helplessly. The wind will no longer fill the sails, and the boat will quickly right itself so you can ride out the storm. Remember, in a panic, just let go of the ropes.'

We would spend our evenings together too. One night, after supper, my father sat beside the fireplace with his military documents on his lap. I liked seeing him with a blanket on his knees, writing notes on the pages as I read in my chair beside him. After an hour, he stopped, looked up from his work and asked, 'What have you discovered in your book tonight?'

If I said something vague like, 'Something sad,' he'd ask me to be more specific.

So, I replied, 'Sister Bernadette has assigned us an English novel – *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens'. I'm at the part where Sydney Carton pretends he's Charles Darnay so that Charles is freed from prison, escapes the guillotine and is united with his love, Lucie.'

My father closed his papers. 'I remember a line from that book: *A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.*'

That is how my father and I got along. He asked serious questions, or shared something that he read or remembered.

On another summer evening, while we were sitting before the flames in the fireplace, he handed me the newspaper and said, 'Simone, you need to know what is happening outside your books. Here, read this.'

My father flattened the newspaper on my lap and pointed to

an article about Albert Forster. I stared at him blankly. He sighed.

‘Albert Forster is in charge in Poland. He’s a Nazi and calls Jews dirty and slippery. He’s a monster, Simone. Look here at what he says: *Poland will only be a dream.*’

I looked up from the newspaper. Being an officer in the army, my father knew much about political and military events.

‘That man wants to invade Poland,’ my father said, as he lifted the paper from my lap and tossed it into the fire. He and I watched the paper smoke, turn black, and then flare up into orange flames.

I did not know then that the first torch of the war was soon to be lit, but my father knew. I did not know then that the monster of war was on its way to get me.

Many years later I would learn that two to three million Polish Jews and two to three million non-Jewish ethnic Poles would be victims of the Nazi genocide.

CHAPTER 3

Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of Germany, convinced his nation that its Aryan heritage was a superior branch of humanity and that they needed to expand for 'Lebensraum' (living space). On 11 April 1939 he issued the directive 'Fall Weiss' – the strategic, planned invasion of Poland.

The war crept up behind me like poison ivy, a slow progress that I didn't fully recognize or understand at first. The world didn't fully recognize it either. After the First World War, my father had told me that German society had collapsed under the burden of its defeat. When the Nazi Party took control, he told me, Hitler had made promises about the future and reminded people that they were superior beings: white, unique in intelligence, best prepared to rule over the weak ... especially the Jews. And bit by bit, the Nazis began a slow, meticulous rearmament that was done at first in secret.

He told me that the Nazis promised a return of national pride and that Hitler orchestrated the largest industrial improvement the German nation had ever seen. I was mildly interested, but didn't really understand too much of what it meant at the time.

One summer afternoon I was bored. The sun was hot. I felt restless, so I went looking for something to read in my father's study. As I scanned the bookshelf, I found a six-year-old newspaper article tucked inside Thomas Mann's novel, *The Magic Mountain*. It was an article about Nazis burning books. An organization called the German Student Union had decided it was important to burn books in a public ceremony; books that didn't support the pro-Nazi movement.

The newspaper article quoted part of a speech given in May 1933 by Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda of Nazi Germany, to more than 40,000 people at a book-burning ceremony in Berlin:

The era of extreme Jewish intellectualism is now at an end. The breakthrough of the German revolution has again cleared the way on the German path ... You do well in this midnight hour to commit to the flames the evil spirit of the past.

According to the article, Thomas Mann's novel was one of the 25,000 books committed to the flames to consume the 'evil spirit of the past'. I was horrified to learn that students my age had burned books, novels, plays, poetry. *How could it be?* I thought. I looked at my father's bookshelf, at all of those beautifully bound pages. I would have to ask my father about this. This could never happen here, in Belgium, could it?

As I refolded the article and placed it back inside the book, I heard a knock on the front door. When I opened the door there stood Nicole, our neighbour's eight-year-old daughter.

'Is Charlotte coming today, Mademoiselle Simone?'

‘Yes, *ma petite*,’ I said. ‘Yes, in a few minutes. I’ll get the carrot.’

Every Sunday afternoon, for as long as I could remember, Corporal Anthony De Waden, a soldier in the Belgian army, led a great white horse down the centre of our street, knocked on our front door, and asked, ‘Is the general ready?’ The army did not name its horses, but I called her Charlotte, and always brought her a treat.

I went back into the house for a carrot and when I returned, Nicole was spinning on the pavement in one of her made-up dances, twirling with excitement as her mother stepped out onto the street.

‘*Bonjour*, Simone.’

‘*Bonjour*, Madame Johnson.’

‘I see you and Nicole are waiting for Charlotte again?’

‘Yes, she’s a bit late, but Nicole has been entertaining me with her dancing.’ The little girl twirled once more and bowed. Madame Johnson picked up her daughter and said, ‘When we lived in America, Nicole took dancing lessons.’

‘I learned the waltz,’ the girl said as Corporal De Waden arrived with Charlotte.

He waved and asked, ‘Is the general ready?’

Madame Johnson placed Nicole gently back onto the pavement, waved hello to the corporal and retired to her home just as I heard my father call out, ‘Simone!’

‘I’ll be right back,’ I said to Corporal De Waden as I re-entered the house.

I stood in the hallway shadows as my father walked down the stairs in his uniform. His medals hung like cherries. Gold buttons held his jacket tightly against his wide chest. White gloves covered his two hands. In his right hand he held his hat.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he extended his right arm and said, 'Mademoiselle Simone may join me outside, if she'd like.'

Major General Joseph Lyon hooked his good right arm under my left arm and escorted me out onto Avenue St Margaret, where Corporal De Waden, Nicole and Charlotte stood waiting. Each Sunday I made sure that I wore a dress, stockings, and my church leather shoes to enhance the spectacle of the general and his daughter walking towards the large, white horse.

As my father placed his black boot into the stirrup and grabbed onto the saddle, Nicole and I fed the carrot to Charlotte. Corporal De Waden made sure the horse was stable, and that my father was comfortable as he adjusted his hat and slipped the reins into his gloved hands.

Every Sunday my father rode Charlotte through Parc de Bruxelles, the largest park in the city. People waved. In response, my father nodded his head, or gave a smart salute – Long live Belgium! – as my father sat erect in his saddle, a living monument in motion, galloping between the tulips, under the great elms, a visible reminder that the reins of victory, order, and law were held in competent hands.

As my father rode down the street, the corporal gave me a jaunty salute and a wink, and then stepped into a waiting car. Nicole thanked me for the carrot and disappeared into her house.

CHAPTER 4

It must be made clear even to the German milkmaid that Polishness equals sub-humanity. Poles, Jews and gypsies are on the same inferior level ... This should be brought home as a leitmotif ... until everyone in Germany sees every Pole, whether farm worker or intellectual, as vermin.

Adolf Hitler, October 1939, Directive No.1306 of Nazi
Germany's Propaganda Ministry

A few days later, at the end of August, there was a radio broadcast announcing that Russia and Germany had signed a neutrality pact. Hearing people in my neighbourhood speak about the war, I began to understand that more was happening in Germany than I had realized.

'Not again,' Madame Johnson said to the postman. 'We've already had one devastating war.' The priest in church quoted from the Bible about putting on the armour of God so we could protect ourselves from the devil.

'Do we have a neutrality pact with Russia and Germany?' I asked my father that evening.

'Belgium is a peace-loving country,' my father said. 'We are neutral, yes, in the eyes of the world.' So, I was confident that

Belgium was strong and safe. And I felt stronger and safer because I already knew Hava Daniels.

I had met her at the Red Cross in the middle of July. My local priest had announced at Mass that the Red Cross needed volunteers to pack clothes for people in Poland. My father had told me there was a possibility that Germany would invade Poland, so I had gone to the Red Cross in part because I wanted to make a difference, and in part because I was afraid. I thought that perhaps, in my small, illogical way, I could stop the German army and the threat of invasion if the Polish people were warm, secure, and brave – and had the right clothes. I was properly clothed and secure, but never brave.

When I arrived at the Red Cross, women in white sweaters ushered me into a large room. At one end of the room a pile of used clothes nearly reached the ceiling. At the other end of the room trousers, skirts, blouses, and sweaters had been heaped on rows of long tables. Standing on both sides of the tables women pulled the clothes along, as if on a conveyor belt. They removed trousers that were ripped, or vests that were heavily stained.

A large woman with a carnival smile greeted me. 'We are happy to have the general's daughter,' she said, as she led me to one of the tables. 'This is Simone,' my escort said to no one in particular. 'She has come to volunteer for the day.'

Some of the women smiled; some ignored me. Hava, a girl who seemed to be about my age, turned from her work at the table, and, with a torn sock in her hand, looked at me and said, '*Bonjour*,' and then made room for me beside her.

I squeezed in between Hava and a woman who sneezed often and said, '*Bonjour*.' And that was that – Hava and I became immediate friends.

I quickly learned that Hava was also 18 and was in love with the opera singer John Charles Tillman. When Hava and I walked down Rue de Ville after our day at the Red Cross, she, walking in bare feet, slapped her shoes on the railings in cadence with her voice: 'John-Charles-Tillman! John-Charles-Tillman!' She thought he looked like a prince disguised as a famous opera singer. Before he sang at the Royal Opera for the first time, Hava bought two tickets. 'He has come to Belgium to whisk me away with him,' Hava smiled, as she handed me a ticket the second time we met.

She was a girl who possessed enough adrenaline to climb the Eiffel Tower every sixty seconds and who lived with an imagination that spilled into poetic facts – her facts.

'John-Charles-Tillman. John-Charles-Tillman.'

'How do you even know what he looks like?' I asked.

'There are posters all over town announcing his appearance in the opera. He's American, born in Pennsylvania. Can you imagine what a place looks like that has the name *Pennsylvania*?'

I had seen those posters, without paying them much attention. When I looked again properly, I found that John Charles Tillman did, indeed, resemble a handsome prince: black hair; round, boyish face. The opera posters advertised *Salomé*, a story about the Princess Salomé at a time when people believed in prophets, not many years after the death of Christ.

'He dreamt of owning a rowing boat when he was a boy,' Hava said, as she stopped chanting his name. 'I read in a magazine that he loves boats. I love boats.'

'Since when?' I asked.

'Since John Charles Tillman carried me onto his yacht moored at the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbour. So ... can

you come? The opera house is across town. I'm not sure my father will let me go on my own, but with you there I might have a better chance. What do you think? Next Tuesday, eight o'clock?'

'I think yes.' I smiled. 'What's the opera about?'

'Love and death – the usual story. There's a captain of the guard who's in love with *Salomé*, but Salomé loves someone else. She performs the dance of the seven veils.'

Here is where Hava, right in the middle of Rue de Ville, imitated an exotic princess seducing a lamp-post. The lamp-post wasn't interested but, according to Hava, the captain of the guard would have been.

I was embarrassed that someone might be watching, as Hava unfurled an invisible mask from her face and began to dance seductively around the lamp-post, waving her imaginary veil over her head.

'Hava, stop dancing. The police will be called. My father is a general in the army. It won't look good for me.'

'Salomé slowly strips off one veil at a time,' Hava said with glee, 'and the king promises her that he will grant her any wish if she takes off the final veil.' Hava began a pretend striptease. 'She does so and then demands the head of the prophet.'

I giggled.

'The poor king is so frightened of the prophet's powers that he offers Salomé rings, gold, or wild animals instead, but Salomé is determined to seek revenge upon the man who turned her down. So, the king has no choice but to have the prophet beheaded.'

Hava stopped at the window of a chocolate shop. She turned to me and ran her finger dramatically across her throat. 'When the prophet's head is brought to Salomé on a tray, she feels such remorse

that she kisses the prophet's lips. The king is so repulsed – and jealous
– that he orders the death of Salomé, too. End of the opera.'

'What part does John Charles Tillman play?'

'I don't know. The prophet I hope. Let's buy some chocolate.'

CHAPTER 5

Europe cannot find peace until the Jewish question has been solved.

In the course of my life I have very often been a prophet and have usually been ridiculed for it. Today I will once more be a prophet: if the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.

Adolf Hitler, 22 August 1939, Obersalzberg, speech to chief military commanders

Five days later I went to Hava's home for the first time. When I reached her house on the Marché au Charbon, not far from the Grand Place, I noticed the door made from heavy black wood. I had never seen such a door, decorated with brass hinges and filigree scrolled on each corner. In the middle of the door was a knocker in the shape of a small brass fist, and below that was the single word engraved on an iron plaque: DANIELS.

To the right of the door was a small, rectangular decorative case marked with a single Hebrew letter: ך.

I was about to reach for the brass fist when the black door opened and there was Hava. Her long golden hair, usually neatly combed and braided, was dishevelled. She wore a plain white dress.

My hair was brown, short, and ruled by unmanageable curls that I pinned back.

‘You’ve come after all,’ Hava said as she reached out and grabbed my hand. ‘I told Mama and Papa all about you.’

‘Did you tell them that Clark Gable is my greatest admirer?’ We had discussed the actor at our last meeting, after discovering that he had been cast as Rhett Butler in the forthcoming film version of *Gone with the Wind*.

‘I decided that they would be much more impressed that you are the daughter of General Lyon. And Simone, I ought to warn you, my parents are from Poland and as serious about God as I am about the opera.’

‘Why is it so dark?’ I asked Hava as she closed the door behind me and we stepped into the front hall.

Hava whispered, ‘Today is the Day of Mourning.’ She explained to me that it was also a day of fasting, Tisha B’Av. ‘On this day we remember the destruction of the First Temple in our country. King Solomon built it for his kingdom, but in 586 BC the Babylonians tore the temple down.’

I looked at Hava as the dim daylight from the front door seemed to enshroud her in a ghost-like mist.

‘The Second Temple built by Ezra was destroyed by the Romans. That’s when the people of Judea began the Jewish exile from the Holy Land. Our holy books tell us the Second Temple was destroyed on the Ninth of Av in the Hebrew calendar – or today, 25 July.’

I looked at Hava as the soft light outlined the bones in her cheek, and then I whispered, 'Who cares about old temples!' just as Hava's father stepped into the hall.

'Is this your Red Cross friend?'

Yaakov Yosef Daniels' face looked like a woodcarving: deep wrinkles above a beard of bark. He wore a tangled white and blue shawl draped over his shoulder, the shawl held tightly around his neck with one hand. In the other hand he held an old book.

Yaakov Yosef Daniels looked at me seriously, then said, 'The stones of the old temples are the punctuation marks of history. Have you come to mourn with us?'

Hava explained to her father that I had come to escort her to the opera, as I stood in the hall trying to reverse time and erase my dismissive words from the crumbling temples that began to surround me.

'Opera? For over twenty-five centuries we have celebrated Tisha B'Av, and now my daughter wants to go to the opera?'

Yaakov looked at my wild brown hair and my brightly embroidered dress.

'What is your name?' Yaakov asked.

'Papa, I told you, her name is Simone Lyon. Her father is General Joseph Lyon.'

I extended my hand, but Yaakov raised his book and shook his head. 'It is forbidden to greet each other on this day. Perhaps another day, daughter of the general. We do not eat or drink for a day, in remembrance of those who suffered before us. We do not wash or bathe, but surrender ourselves to the desecrated bodies of our ancestors. We do not use oil or cream on our skin, or wear leather shoes. We atone for the suffering. Follow me.' Yaakov waved his book.

‘But, Papa,’ Hava said. ‘The opera?’

Yaakov stopped, turned, and looked at the two of us standing in the opal light.

‘First, you will listen to the song of my world, and then you may go to the song of your world.’ Then Yaakov added as he winked at me, ‘Different temples; similar form of worship.’

Hava and I entered a room where I was introduced to Hava’s mother, Avital, and her 10-year-old brother, Benjamin.

‘Welcome, Simone,’ Avital said.

As I sat between Madame Daniels and Benjamin, the boy looked at me and said, ‘Hi! I can blow a bubble as big as my head.’

‘Benjamin,’ Yaakov said in a deep voice. The boy lowered his head. Hava giggled.

In the corner of the room was a Sabbath light; a brass, three-branched candelabra. On a side table against the wall a Passover dish waited with its eight indentations for chopped nuts, grated apples, cinnamon, and sweet red wine, parsley, roasted lamb, hard-boiled eggs, and bitter herbs. A wine cup stood next to it. ‘This is for when we break our fast,’ Hava explained.

Many pictures were displayed on the table: grandparents in their wedding gowns, uncles sitting in canoes, children standing in fountains, plump babies, women under beach umbrellas. And so many books filled the shelves: novels, poetry, history. I even saw a new copy of *Gone with the Wind*.

Hava sat stoically between her mother and father.

‘We all suffer,’ Yaakov said. ‘We witness the sorrow of the flowers, Simone. Although they will blossom, exude aromas, and celebrate themselves with colours of yellow and red, they will perish just the same. But God does not allow the *idea* of the flowers to perish.’

‘Your father suffered greatly in the war with the Germans,’ Yaakov continued. ‘He lost the use of his arm, and yet today he is a great general because he remains a good man, and because he understands suffering.’ He turned to his daughter.

‘Hava, I say to you, go to your opera tonight with your friend, but remember, you are a girl of light. Simone, we live in darkness on this day of lamentation, to remember the light of our souls.’

Yaakov lifted the book he had been holding since he first stepped into the hallway. I noticed the blue veins in his hands, and then I listened as he read:

‘Console, O Lord, the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem and the city laid waste, despised and desolate. In mourning for she is childless, her dwellings laid waste, despised in the downfall of her glory and desolate through the loss of her inhabitants. Legions have devoured her, worshippers of strange gods have possessed her. They have put the people of Israel to the sword. Therefore, let Zion weep bitterly and Jerusalem give forth her voice. For You, O Lord, did consume her with fire, and with fire You will in future restore her. Blessed are You, O Lord, Who consoles Zion and builds Jerusalem.’

‘Hava,’ Yaakov said to his daughter, ‘remember what we say to God: *Blessed are You, O Lord, who consoles all men and women and builds every home, for we shall all be restored.*’

Hava looked at me from across the small table and winked.

‘Now, go to your opera.’

INSPIRE

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